

Notes Off the Cuff

by
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To the long-suffering writers of Russia who rove o'er land and sea

PART ONE

1

An editor of the deceased *Russkoye Slovo*, in gaiters and with a cigar, snatched the telegram off the desk and read it through swiftly from beginning to end with a practised professional eye. •

One hand automatically jotted down "two columns", while the lips unexpectedly rounded and whistled "Phew-ew!"

He paused for a moment. Then abruptly tore off a sheet of notepaper and scribbled:

*Tiflis is forty miles away,
Who can sell me a car today?*

"Short feuilleton" at the top, "Long primer" at the side and "Rook" at the bottom.

Suddenly he muttered like Dickens's Jingle:

"Uh-huh! Uh-huh! I guessed as much. Might have to beat it. Never mind! I've got six thousand lire in Rome. *Credito Italiano*. What? Six... And actually I'm an Italian officer! Yes, sir! *Finita la comedia!*"

And with another whistle he pushed back his cap and hurried out of the door — telegram and feuilleton in hand.

"Stop!" I yelled, coming to my senses. "Stop! What *Credito*? *Finita*? What? Catastrophe?"

But he had vanished.

I was about to run after him... but then shrugged my shoulders, frowned limply and sank onto the divan. What was bothering me? The *Credito*, whatever it was? The commotion? No, it wasn't that... Ah, yes. My head! It was aching like billyho. The second day running. First a strange chill ran down my spine. Then just the

opposite: my body felt all hot and dry, and my forehead unpleasantly clammy. My temples were throbbing. I'd caught cold. That wretched February fog! But I mustn't get ill! I just mustn't get ill!

*

Everything's unfamiliar, but I must have got used to it over the last six weeks. How good it feels after the fog. At home. The cliff and the sea in the golden frame. The books in the bookcase. The carpet on the sofa is too rough for comfort and the cushion's terribly hard. But I wouldn't get up for anything. I feel so lazy! Can't be bothered to lift a hand. I've spent half an hour thinking I must stretch it out to get the aspirin powder on the chair, but even that's too much trouble.

"Pop the thermometer in, Misha!"

"Oh, I couldn't bear to! I haven't got a temperature anyway!"

*

Oh, my goodness, my goodness, my goo-oodness! Thirty-eight point nine ... could it be typhus? No, of course not. Where from? But what if it *is* typhus! Anything you like, only not now! That would be awful. It's nothing. Hypochondria. I've just got a cold. Influenza. I'll take an aspirin tonight and be as right as rain tomorrow!

*

Thirty-nine point five!

"It isn't typhus, is it, Doctor? Not typhus? I think it's just influenza? Eh? The fog..."

"Yes, yes... The fog. Breathe in, please. Deeper... That's it!"

"I've got to attend to some very important business, Doctor. It won't take long. Can I?"

"Are you crazy!"

*

The cliff, the sea, and the sofa are blazing hot. The pillow's already hot, as soon as I turn it over and put my head on it. Never mind. I'll stick it out one more night, and leave tomorrow. Leave for good if necessary! For good! Mustn't let this get me down! It's only influenza. Nice to be ill and have a temperature. Forget about everything. Lie in bed and rest. Only not now, for Heaven's sake! There's no time for reading in this diabolical chaos... How I long for... What do I long for? Yes. Forests and mountains. Only not these damned Caucasian ones. But ours, far away... Melnikov-Pechersky ⁽¹⁾. A hermitage in the snow. A light in the window and a nice hot steam bath. Yes, forests and mountains. I'd give half my kingdom to be sweating in a steam bath. That would do the trick-Then dive into the snow with nothing on... Forests! Dense pine forests. Good for making ships. Peter in a green caftan ⁽²⁾ chopping down trees. What a fine-sounding stately word — inasmuch! In-as-much! Forests, ravines, carpets of pine-needles, a snow-covered hermitage. And a choir of nuns singing in sweet harmony:

Victorious leader of triumphant hosts!

Hang on! What nuns! You won't find any nuns there. Where are they now, nuns? Black, white, slender Vasnetsovian ⁽³⁾ nuns?

"Larissa Leontievna, where are the nuns?"

"He's delirious, poor thing!"

"I certainly am not. Not in the slightest. Nuns! What's the matter, don't you understand? Give me that book. Over there, on the third shelf. Melnikov-Pechersky..."

"You mustn't read, Misha, dear!"

"What's that? Why not? I'll be up tomorrow! And go to see Petrov. You don't understand. They'll leave me behind! Leave me behind!"

"Oh, alright then. Get up if you must! Here's the book."

"Lovely book. With that old, familiar smell. But the lines are hopping about all over the place. I remember. They were forging banknotes at the hermitage, Romanov banknotes. What an awful memory I've got. It was notes, not nuns.

Sasha basher, tra-la-la!

"Larissa Leontievna... Larochnka! Do you like forests and mountains? I'll get me to a monastery. Yes, I will! Some remote hermitage. With forest all round and birds twittering, and not a living soul... I'm sick of this idiotic war! I'll go to Paris and write a novel first, then get me to a monastery. Only tell Anna to wake me up at eight o'clock tomorrow morning. I was supposed to see him yesterday. Can't you understand?"

"Yes, yes, I understand. Only you must keep quiet."

*

Fog. Hot reddish fog. Forests, more forests ... and water trickling slowly from a crevice in a green rock. A taut crystal thread. Must crawl up and have a good drink. That'll do the trick. It's hard crawling over pine-needles, they're all sticky and prickly. I open my eyes, and there's just a sheet, no pine-needles.

"For heaven's sake! What's the matter with this sheet. Have they sprinkled sand on it? I'm thirsty!"

"Yes, yes, I won't be a moment."

"Ugh, it's so warm, what horrid water."

"...Forty point five again! How dreadful!"

"...an ice-bag..."

"Doctor! I insist on being sent to Paris rightaway! I don't want to stay in Russia any longer... If you won't send me, kindly hand me my Brow... Browning! Larochnk-a-a! Go and fetch it!"

"Yes, yes, we'll fetch it. Only don't get excited!"

*

Darkness. A ray of light. Darkness ... a ray of light. I can't remember for the life of me...

My head! My head! There are no nuns or triumphant hosts, just demons trumpeting and tearing at my skull with their red-hot hooks. My he-ad!

*

A ray of light... darkness. A ray ... no, it's gone. Nothing awful, just couldn't care less. Head not aching. Darkness and forty-one point one...

2. WHAT WE GONNA DO?

The novelist Yuri Slyozkin ⁽⁴⁾ sat in a posh armchair. Everything in the room was posh, so Yuri looked excruciatingly out of place there. His head shaven by typhus was just like that boy's head described by Mark Twain (a pepper-sprinkled egg). A moth-eaten army jacket with a hole under the arm. Grey puttees, one longer than the other, on his legs. A two-kopeck pipe in his mouth. And fear leap-frogging with anguish in his eyes.

"What's going to become of us?" I asked, hardly recognising my own voice. After the second bout it was weak, reedy and cracked.

"What's that?"

I turned round in bed and looked wretchedly out of the window, where still naked branches were waving slowly. The exquisite sky touched faintly by the fading sunset gave no reply, of course. Slyozkin was silent too, nodding his shorn head. In the next room a dress rustled and a woman's voice whispered:

"The Ingushes will raid the town tonight..."

Slyozkin twitched in his chair and corrected her:

"The Ossetians, not the Ingushes. And tomorrow morning, not tonight."

The flasks behind the wall responded nervously.

"The Ossetians! Oh, my God! That's terrible!"

"What difference does it make?"

"What difference? Ah, you don't know the local customs. When the Ingushes raid, they raid. But when the Ossetians raid, they kill too."

"Will they kill everyone?" Slyozkin asked in a matter-of-fact voice, puffing on his foul-smelling pipe.

"Goodness me! What a strange person you are! Not everyone... Just those who... Oh, dear, what's the matter with me! I forgot. We're disturbing the patient."

A dress rustled. The lady of the house bent over me.

"I am not dis-turb-ed..."

"Nonsense," Slyozkin retorted sharply. "Nonsense!"

"What's nonsense?"

"All that about Ossetians and the rest of it. Rubbish." He puffed out a cloud of smoke.

My exhausted brain suddenly sang out:

Mamma! Mamma! What we gonna do?

"And what precisely are we going to do?"

Slyozkin grinned with his right cheek only, thought for a moment and had a burst of inspiration.

"We'll open an ASS, an Arts Sub-Section!"

"What on earth is that?"
"What?"
"A sob-sexy on?"
"No, a sub-section!"
"Sub?"
"That's right."
"Why sub?"
"Er ... well, you see," he shifted around, "there's a Sec. of Ed. or Ed. Sec. Sec. Get it? And this is a sub-section. Sub. Get it?"
"Sec. of Ed. Pin-head. Barbousse. Screw loose."
The lady of the house let fly.
"Don't talk to him, for goodness sake! He'll get delirious again..."
"Nonsense!" said Yuri sternly. "Nonsense! And all those Mingrelians and Imere... What are they called? Circassians. They're plain stupid!"
"Why?"
"They just rush about. Shooting. At the moon. They won't rob anyone."
"But what'll happen? To us?"
"Nothing. We'll open up..."
"The Arts?"
"That's right. The whole lot. Fine Arts. Photo. Lit. and Dram."
"I don't get it."
"Please don't talk, Misha dear! The doctor..."
"Tell you later! It'll be alright. I've been in charge before. What do we care? We're a-political. We're Art!"
"And how shall we live?"
"We'll hide our money behind the carpet."
"What carpet?"
"In the town where I was in charge, we had a carpet on the wall. And when we got paid, my wife and I used to hide it behind the carpet. They were anxious times. But we ate. Ate well. Special rations."
"What about me?"
"You'll be ASS Lit. head. Yes."
"What head?"
"Please, Misha. I beg you!"

3.

THE ICON-LAMP

The night swims. Pitch black. Can't sleep. The icon-lamp flickers anxiously.
Shots in the distance. My brain's on fire.
Everything's misty.

Mamma! Mamma! What we gonna do?

Slyozkin's building something. Piling something up. Fine Arts. Photo. Lit.

Dram. Scram. Sam. It's photographic boxes. Why? ASS Lit. for the writers. Poor blighters. Dram. Ham. Ingushes gallop about on horseback, eyes flashing. Pinching the boxes. Dreadful racket. Shooting at the moon. Nurse injects my thigh with camphor. A third bout!

"Help! What'll happen? Let me go! I must get out..."

"Be quiet, Misha dear. Be quiet!"

After the morphine the Ingushes disappear. The velvety night sways. The icon-lamp casts its divine light and sings in a crystal voice:

Ma-amma! Ma-amma!

4.

AND HERE IT IS—THE SUB-SECTION

Sun. Clouds of dust behind carriage wheels. People walking in and out of an echoing building. A room on the fourth floor. Two cupboards with broken doors, some rickety tables. Three young ladies with violet lips bang away loudly at typewriters, stopping now and then to have a smoke.

In the very centre a writer snatched from death's jaws fashions a sub-section out of the chaos. Fine. Dram. Actors' bluish faces keep pestering him. Asking for money.

After the typhus a rocking swell. Dizziness and nausea. But I'm in charge. ASS Lit. head. Getting to know the ropes.

"ASS head. Sec. of Ed. Lit. Coll."

A man walks between the tables. In a grey army jacket and monstrous riding-breeches. He plunges into groups that fall apart. Like a torpedo boat ploughing the waves. Everyone quails under his glance. Except the young ladies. They're not afraid of anything.

He comes up. Eyes boring into me, he plucks out my heart, places it in his palm and scrutinises it carefully. But it is as clear as crystal.

He puts it back and smiles graciously.

"ASS Lit. head?"

"That's it."

He goes on his way. Seems a good chap. Only what's he doing here? Doesn't look like Dram. And certainly not like Lit.

A poetess arrives. Black beret. Skirt buttoned down the side and stockings falling down. She's brought a poem.

*Dee, dee, deep down,
In my heart
Beats a dynamo-machine.
Dee, dee, deep down.*

Not a bad poem. We'll have it ... you know ... what do they call it ... recited at a concert.

The poetess looks pleased. Not a bad young lassy. But why doesn't she hitch up her stockings?

5.

GENTLEMAN-OF-THE-BEDCHAMBER PUSHKIN

Everything was fine. Everything was dandy.

And then I got the push all because of Pushkin, Alexander Sergeyevich, God rest his soul!

It was like this.

A workshop of local poets nested in the office, under the spiral staircase. A young man in blue student trousers with a dynamo-machine in his heart, a doddery old man who started writing poems at the age of fifty-nine, and a few others.

In sidled a dare-devil with an aquiline nose and a big revolver in his belt. He was the first to thrust his ink-intoxicated pen into the hearts of those who had escaped the knife and turned up for old time's sake at the track—the former Summer Theatre. To the incessant booming of the muddy Terek, he cursed lilac and thundered:

*You've had enough songs about moonlight and
sweet things.*

Now I'll sing you one about emergency meetings.

It was most impressive!

Then another one read a paper on Gogol and Dostoyevsky wiping them both off the face of the earth. He spoke disapprovingly of Pushkin, but in passing. Promising to devote a special report to him. One night in June he tore Pushkin off a strip. For his white trousers, his "*I face the future without fear...*" ⁽⁵⁾, his Gentleman-of-the-Bedchamberism, ⁽⁶⁾ his elementary rebel, and in general for his "pseudo-revolutionism and hypocrisy", obscene poetry and gadding around after women...

Bathed in sweat I sat in the front row of the stuffy hall and heard the speaker rip Pushkin's white trousers to shreds. When, after refreshing his dry gullet with a glass of water, he finally suggested throwing Pushkin into the stove, I smiled. I must confess. It was an enigmatic smile, blast it! A smile's not a bird in a bush, is it?

"Then you defend him."

"I don't want to!"

"You haven't any civic courage."

"Is that so? Alright, I'll defend him."

And so I did, damn it! I spent three days and three nights preparing. Sitting at an open window by a lamp with a red shade. On my lap lay a book written by the man with eyes of fire.

*False wisdom pales at the first tiny glimmer
Of true wisdom's ne'er-fading light... ⁽⁷⁾*

It was He who said:

Indifferent alike to praise or blame... (8)

No, not indifferent! No. I'll show them! I'll show them alright. I shook my fist at the inky night.

And show them I did! There was commotion in the workshop. The speaker was out for the count. In the eyes of the audience I read a silent, jubilant:

"Finish him off!"

*

.....
But afterwards! Afterwards...

I was a "wolf in sheep's clothing". A "toff". A "bourgeois yes-man".....

So now I'm not head of ASS Lit. Or Dram. I'm a stray dog in an attic. Hunched up. Shuddering when the bell rings at night

Oh, dusty days! Oh, stuffy nights!

*

And in the summer of 1920 A. D. there did appear a vision from Tiflis. A young man, all broken and disjointed, with an aged wrinkled face, arrived and offered his services as a brawler poet. He brought with him a slim volume like a wine price-list. The book contained his poems.

Lily-of-the-valley is rhymed with don't shilly-shally.

It's enough to drive you bonkers!

The young man took an instant dislike to me. He brawled in the newspaper (page 4, column 4). About me. And about Pushkin. Not about anything else. He hates Pushkin more than me. It's alright for Pushkin! He's passed into the great beyond...

But I'll be squashed like a worm.

6.

THE BRONZE COLLAR

What a bloody awful town Tiflis is! A second one's arrived. In a bronze collar. Yes, bronze. And he spoke in a live magazine like that. I'm not joking! In a bronze collar, see!.....

The novelist Slyozkin has been sent packing, regardless of his nation-wide reputation and his pregnant wife. That one's taken his place. So much for Lit. and Dram. And money behind the carpet.....

7.

THE BOYS IN THE BOX

The moon's in a corona. Yuri and I sit on the balcony and look at the canopy of stars. But it doesn't help. In a few hours' time the stars will fade and a ball of fire will flame up overhead. And we'll squirm again like beetles on pins...

A high unbroken squeal can be heard through the balcony door. Somewhere at the back of beyond, by the foot of a mountain, in a strange town, a son has been born to starving Slyozkin in an absurdly, bestially cramped room. They have put him on the window-sill in a box with the words:

"M-me Marie. Modes et Robes."

And he whimpers in the box.

Poor child!

Poor us, not the child.

The mountains have hemmed us in. Table Mountain sleeps under the moon. Far, far away in the north lie the endless plains... In the south ravines, precipices, swirling rivers. Somewhere in the west is the sea. Above it shines the Golden Horn...

...Have you seen the flies on Tangle-foot?

When the crying stops, we go into the cage.

Tomatoes. A little black bread. And *araki*. What filthy vodka! Disgusting! Still it does the trick.

And when all around is fast asleep, the writer reads me his new novel. There's no one else to hear it. The night swims. He finishes, wraps up the manuscript carefully and puts it under the pillow. There is no writing-desk.

We whisper until the pale dawn.

What names are on our dry tongues! What names! How Pushkin's verse can soften spiteful souls. Beware of spite, writers of Russia!

Truth comes only through suffering. That's right, rest assured! But no one pays you or gives you food parcels for knowing the truth. Sad, but so.

8.

A THROUGH WIND

Yevreinov ⁽⁹⁾ arrived. In an ordinary white collar. From the Black Sea on his way to Petersburg.

There used to be such a city in the north.

Does it still exist? The writer laughs and assures us that it does. But it takes a long time to get there. Three years in a goods van. My tired eyes feasted for a whole evening on his white collar. And for a whole evening I listened to tales of adventure.

Brother writers, your vocation... ⁽¹⁰⁾

He hadn't got a penny. His luggage had been stolen...

...On another evening at Slyozkin's, the last, Nikolai Nikolayevich sat at the piano in the smoke-filled drawing-room provided by the landlady. He endured the torment of inspection with iron stamina. Four poets, a poetess and a painter (workshop) devoured him decorously with their eyes.

Yevreinov is an ingenious fellow.

"And now 'Musical Grimaces'..."

Turning his face to the keys, he began to play. At first... At first he gave us a visiting elephant playing the piano, then a lovesick piano-tuner, a dialogue between steel and gold and, finally, a polka.

Within ten minutes the workshop was totally incapacitated. It no longer sat decorously, but rolled about hysterically with much waving of hands and groaning...

...The man with the lively eyes went away. No more grimaces!

*

A sudden gust of wind blew through, and they were swept away like leaves. One from Kerch to Vologda, another from Vologda to Kerch. A rumpled Osip appears with a suitcase, complaining angrily:

"We'll never get there, and that's that!" Of course you won't get there, if you don't know where you're going!

*

Yesterday Riurik Ivnev ⁽¹¹⁾ appeared. On his way from Tiflis to Moscow.

"It's better in Moscow."

He travelled so much that one day he just lay down in a ditch.

"I refuse to get up. Something must happen."

And so it did. A friend chanced to see him there, took him home and gave him a meal.

Another poet went from Moscow to Tiflis.

It's better in Tiflis.

The third was Osip Mandelstam. ⁽¹²⁾ He arrived one cloudy day, holding his head high like a prince. His laconic remarks devastated us.

"From the Crimea. Ghastly. Do they buy manuscripts here?"

"Yes, but they don't pay..." Before I could finish he had gone. I know not where...

The novelist Pilnyak ⁽¹³⁾ went to Rostov in a flour train, wearing a woman's cardigan.

"Is it better in Rostov?"

"No, I just want a rest!"

Eccentric — wears gold-rimmed spectacles.

*

Serafimovich arrived from up north. ⁽¹⁴⁾

Tired eyes. Hollow voice. Gave a talk in the workshop.

"Remember Tolstoy's kerchief on a stick. It keeps catching, then fluttering again. As if it were alive... I once wrote an anti-drink label for a vodka bottle. Jotted down a phrase. Crossed one word out and put another over it. Thought a bit, then crossed that one out too. And so on several times. But the phrase came out pat. Now they write... They write in a funny way! You pick it up. Read it through. No! Can't understand it. You have another try — still no luck. So you put it to one side..."

The local workshop sits by the wall *in cor pore*. Judging from their eyes they don't understand it. That's their business!

Serafimovich's left town... Entr'acte.

9.

THE INCIDENT WITH THE GREAT WRITERS

The Sub-Section's decorator painted Anton Pavlovich Chekhov with a crooked nose and such a monstrous pince-nez that from a distance he seemed to be wearing racing goggles.

We put him on a big easel. A gingery-coloured pavilion, a small table with a carafe and a lamp.

I read an introductory article "On Chekhovian Humour". But perhaps because I hadn't eaten for three days or for some other reason, my thoughts were rather sombre. The theatre was packed. Now and then I lost the thread. I saw hundreds of blurred faces rising up to the dome. And not a ghost of a smile on any of them. Mind you, there was some hearty applause. But I realised to my dismay that this was because I had finished, and fled backstage in relief. That was two thousand in my pocket. Now let someone else sweat it out. Going into the smoking-room, I heard a Red Army man complain miserably: "To blazes with them and their humour! We come to the Caucasus and they won't leave us alone here either!"

He was quite right, that soldier from Tula. I hid away in my favourite place, a dark corner behind the props room. A roar came from the hall. Hurrah! They were laughing. Good for the actors! "Surgery" saved the day and the story about the civil servant who sneezed.

Success! Success! Slyozkin rushed into my rat corner and hissed, rubbing his hands:

"Write the second programme!"

It was decided to hold a Pushkin Evening after the Evening of Chekhovian Humour.

Yuri and I planned the programme lovingly.

"That blockhead can't draw," Slyozkin fumed. "We'll ask Maria Ivanovna!"

I immediately feared the worst. In my opinion Maria Ivanovna draws about as well as I play the fiddle... I concluded this when she first appeared in the Sub-Section saying she had studied under the great N. himself. (She was immediately made Head of Fine Arts.) But since I know nothing about painting, I kept quiet.

Exactly half an hour before the beginning I went into the scenery room and stopped dead: there, staring at me from a gold frame, was Nozdryov. (15) He was perfect. Crafty, goggling eyes, even one side-board thinner than the other. The illusion was so complete, that I expected him to give a loud guffaw and say:

"Just got back from a fair, my friend. Congratulate me: gambled all my money away!"

I don't know what my expression was like, but the painter was mortally offended. She blushed a deep red under the thick layer of powder and screwed up her eyes.

"You obviously ... er ... don't like it, eh?"

"Oh, but I do! Ha-ha! It's very ... nice. Very nice. Only the side-whiskers..."

"What? The side-whiskers? You mean to say you've never seen Pushkin? Fancy that! And you call yourself a writer! Tee-hee! Perhaps you think he should be clean-shaven?"

"Sorry, it's not so much the side-whiskers, but Pushkin never played cards, and if he had, he would never have cheated!"

"What have cards got to do with it? I don't understand! You're making a mockery of me, I see!"

"Pardon me, but it is you who are making a mockery. Your Pushkin has the eyes of a scoundrel!" "Ah, so that's it!"

She threw down her brush. And called from the door: "I'll complain to the Sub-Section about you!"

And then what happened! As soon as the curtain went up and Nozdryov appeared before the darkened hall with his sly grin, the first ripple of laughter broke out. Oh, my God! The audience had decided that after Chekhov's humour they were going to get Pushkin's humour! I began to talk in a cold sweat of "the Aurora Borealis in the snow-bound wastes of Russian belles-lettres". There were sniggers in the audience at the side-whiskers. Nozdryov skulked behind me, grunting:

"If I were your boss, I'd string you up on the nearest tree!"

So I couldn't stop myself and let out a snigger too. The success was overwhelming, phenomenal. Neither before nor after have I ever been the recipient of such thunderous applause. And then it began to crescendo. When Salieri poisoned Mozart in the dramatised excerpt the audience expressed its delight with approving guffaws and thunderous cries of "Encore!"

Scampering rat-like out of the theatre I saw from the corner of my eye the poetry brawler scurry into the editorial office with his notebook...

*

I knew as much! On the very front page, fourth column:

MORE PUSHKIN!

Writers from the capital who are skulking in the local Arts Sub-Section have

made a new objective attempt to corrupt the, public by stuffing their idol Pushkin down its throat.

They even took the liberty of portraying this idol as a landlord and serfowner (which he was) with side-whiskers... And so on.

Dear God. Please let that brawler die! Everyone's catching typhus these days. Why can't he get it too? That cretin will get me arrested!

And that infernal old hag from Fine Arts!

Ruined. Everything's ruined. They've banned the evenings...

...Ghastly autumn. Rain lashing down. Can't think what we're going to eat. What on earth are we going to eat?

10.

A FOOT-BINDING AND A BLACK MOUSE

.....

Late one hungry evening, I wade through puddles in the dark. Everything's boarded up. My feet are in tattered socks and battered shoes. There is no sky. In its place hangs a huge foot-binding. Drunk with despair, I mutter:

"Alexander Pushkin. *Lumen coelum. Sancta rosa.* ⁽¹⁶⁾ And his threats ring out like thunder."

Am I going mad? A shadow runs from the street lamp.

It's my shadow, I know. But why is it wearing a top hat, when I've got a cap on? Had to take my top hat to market to buy some food. Some good folk bought it to use as a chamberpot. But I won't sell my heart and brains, even if I'm starving. Despair. A foot-binding overhead and a black mouse in my heart...

11.

NO WORSE THAN KNUT HAMSUN

.....

I'm starving

.....

12.

MUST RUN. MUST RUN!

"A hundred thousand... I've got a hundred thousand! , I earned it!

A barrister's clerk, one of the natives, taught me how. He arrived one day when I was sitting silently, head in hands, and said:

"I'm broke too. There's only one solution — we must write a play. A

revolutionary play. About the life of the natives. And sell it..."

I stared at him vacantly and replied: "I can't write anything about the life of the natives, revolutionary or counter-revolutionary. I know nothing about their life. In fact I can't write anything at all. I'm tired, and I don't think I'm any good at writing anyway."

"You're talking nonsense," he answered. "It's because you're hungry. Be a man. The life of the natives is a cinch. I know it inside out. We'll write the play together. And split the money fifty-fifty."

So we started to write. There was a round hot stove at his place. His wife would hang up the washing on a line in the room, then give us some beetroot salad with vegetable oil and tea with saccharine. He told me some common names and customs, and I made up the plot. So did he. And his wife sat down and advised us too. I realised at once they were much better at it than me. But I didn't feel envious, because I had already decided this was the last play I would ever write...

And so we wrote it. He basked by the stove saying: "I love creating!" I scratched away with my pen...

A week later the three-act play was ready. When I read it through to myself in my unheated room at night, I'm not ashamed to admit that it brought tears to my eyes! In terms of crassness it was unique, remarkable! Something obtuse and insolent stared out of every line of this collective creation. I couldn't believe my eyes. What could I hope for, imbecile, if I wrote like that? Shame stared at me from the damp green walls and the terrible black windows. I began to tear up the manuscript. But then I stopped. Because suddenly with remarkable, unusual clarity I realised the truth of the saying: once written, never destroyed. A work can be torn up, burnt, concealed from others. But never from oneself! It was the end of me! It could never be erased. This astounding thing had been written by me. It was the end!..

*

The play caused a sensation in the native Sub-Section. They bought it at once for two hundred thousand. And a fortnight later it was performed on the stage.

Eyes, daggers and cartridge pockets flashed in the mist of a thousand bated breaths. After heroic horsemen rushed in and grabbed the chief of police and guards in the third act the Chechens, Kabardians and Ingushes yelled:

"Zere! Serves him right, ze cur!"

And following the Sub-Section ladies they shouted: "Author!"

There was a lot of handshaking backstage.

"Vairy gut play!"

And invitations to visit their mountain villages.

*

Must run! Must run!

Quickly. A hundred thousand is enough to get out of here. Forward. To the sea. Over one sea and another to France and dry land — to Paris!

A driving rain lashed my face as, hunched up in my greatcoat, I ran along the alleys for the last time — home...

You — prosewriters and playwrights in Paris and Berlin — just you try. Try,

for the fun of it, to write something worse. If you are as talented as Kuprin, Bunin or Gorky you will not succeed. It is I who hold the record! For collective creativity. The three of us wrote it: me, the barrister's clerk and hunger. At the beginning of nineteen twenty one...

13.

The town at the foot of the mountains has vanished. Curse it... Tsikhidziri. Makhindzhauri. Green Cape! Magnolias in bloom. White flowers the size of plates. Bananas. Palm trees! I saw them myself, I swear it, palm trees growing out of the ground. And the sea singing endlessly by granite cliffs. The books were right. The sun sinks into the water. The beauty of the sea. The high vault of the heavens. The steep cliff, with creeping plants on it. Chakva. Tsikhidziri. Green Cape.

Where am I going? Where? I'm wearing my last shirt. With crooked letters on my cuffs. And heavy hieroglyphs in my heart. I have deciphered only one of these mysterious signs. It says: woe is me! Who will interpret the others for me?

*

I lie like a corpse on pebbles washed by salt water. I am weak with hunger. My head aches from morning to midnight. Now it is night. I cannot see the sea, only hear it rolling. Surging to and fro. A tardy wave hisses. Suddenly three tiers of lights emerge from behind a dark promontory.

The *Polatsky* is sailing to the Golden Horn.

.....

Tears salty as sea water.

Saw a poet, one of the unknown. He was walking round Nuri *Bazaar* trying to sell his hat. The peasants laughed at him.

He smiled shamefacedly and explained he wasn't joking. He was selling his hat because his money had been stolen. That was a lie. He'd been broke for ages. Hadn't eaten for three days. He confessed later, when we were sharing a pound of cheese. Told me he was on his way from Penza to Yalta. I nearly burst out laughing. But then I remembered: what about me?

*

My cup is full to overflowing. The "new head" arrived at twelve o'clock. He walked in and said:

"Ve vill take a different path! No more of ziss pornographia: *Vit Vorks Voe* and *The Government Inspector* by Goggle. Boggle. Ve vill write our own plays."

Then he got into his car and drove off.

His face imprinted itself on my memory forever.

*

An hour later I sold my overcoat at the bazaar. There was an evening boat. But he wouldn't let me go. Understand? Wouldn't let me go!..

*

I've had enough! Let the Golden Horn shine. I'll never reach it. There's a limit to a man's strength. Mine's finished. I'm starving, broken! There's no blood in my brain. I'm weak and scared. But I won't stay here any longer. So ... that means ... that means ...

14.

GOING HOME

Going home. By sea. Then by goods van. And if the money runs out — on foot. But I'm going home. My life is ruined. I'm going home!

To Moscow! To Moscow!

.....
Farewell, Tsikhidziri. Farewell, Makhindzhauri. Green Cape, farewell!

Moscow, 1923

PART TWO

THE MOSCOW ABYSS. TWANVLAM

Pitch dark. Clanging. Rumbling. Wheels still turning, but slower and slower. Now they've stopped. That's it. The end to end all ends. Nowhere else to go. This is Moscow. M-O-S-C-O-W.

A moment's attention to a long powerful sound swelling up in the darkness. Mind-splitting reverberations in my brain:

*C'est la lu-u-tte fina-a-le!
...L'internationa-a-a-le!!*

Here too. Just as hoarse and terrifying:

The Internationale!

A row of goods vans in the dark. The students' carriage had gone quiet...

I took the plunge at last and jumped down. A soft body slipped away from under me with a groan. Then I got caught on a rail and fell even deeper down. Heavens, was there really an abyss below me?

Grey bodies heaved monstrous loads onto their shoulders and flowed off.

A woman's voice:

"Oh, dear, I can't..."

In the misty darkness I made out a medical student. She had travelled with me, hunched up, for three days.

"Allow me to carry that."

For a moment the black abyss seemed to shudder and turn green. How much had she got in there?

"A hundredweight of flour... They trod it down."

Staggered along, zigzagging, spots before the eyes, towards the lights.

They broke into beams. The weird grey snake crawled towards them. A glass dome. A long roaring sound. Blinding light. A ticket. A gate. Exploding voices. Curses falling heavily. More darkness. More light. Darkness. Moscow! Moscow.

The cart was loaded up to the church domes, to the stars in velvet. It clattered along, while the demonic voices of grey bodies cursed it and the man urging on the horse. A flock followed behind. The medical student's long whitish coat appeared now to one side, now to the other. But in the end we emerged from the tangle of wheels, and left the bearded faces behind. We rattled on over the potholed pavement. Pitch black. Where were we? What place was this? Never mind. What did it matter? Moscow was all black, black, black. Silent buildings stared tightly and coldly. A church loomed, looking confused and worried. It was swallowed up in the dark.

Two in the morning. Where can I spend the night? All those houses! What could be easier... Just knock at any door. Could you put me up for the night? I can just imagine it!

Voice of the medical student:
"Where're you going?"
"Don't know."
"What do you mean?"

There are some good souls in this world. "The person who rents the next room is still away in the country, see. You could stay there for one night..."

"Oh, how kind of you. I'll find my friends tomorrow." Cheered up a bit after that. And it's funny, but as soon as I'd found somewhere to stay, I began to feel the effects of losing three nights' sleep.

*

Two bulbs fracture the shadows on a bridge. We plunge into darkness again. A street-lamp. A grey fence with a poster. Huge garish letters. Goodness, what's that word? Twanvlam. What on earth does it mean?

Twelfth Anniversary of Vladimir Mayakovsky.

The cart stopped. They took off some luggage. I stared at the word, entranced. A good word! And I, provincial wretch that I am, had sniggered in the mountains at the ASS head! What the blazes! But Moscow is not as black as its papooses. Sudden urge to imagine Vlam. Never seen him, but I know ... I know. He's about forty, very short and bald, wears glasses and is always dashing about. Short trousers turned up. Works in an office. Doesn't smoke. Has a large flat with portieres, now compulsorily shared with a lawyer, who is a lawyer no longer, but the commandant of a government building. Lives in a study with an unheated fireplace. Likes butter, comic verse and a tidy room. Favourite writer — Conan Doyle. Favourite opera — *Eugene One-gin*. Cooks himself rissoles on a primus-stove. Can't stand the lawyer-commandant, and dreams of getting him out some day, marrying and living happily ever after in five rooms.

The cart creaked, shuddered, moved on for a bit, then stopped again. Neither storm nor tempest could daunt the immortal citizen Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov. By a building, which seemed in the darkness and fear to have about fifteen storeys, the cartload grew perceptibly thinner. In the inky blackness a figure rushed from it into an entrance and whispered: "What about the butter, Dad? And the lard, Dad? And the flour, Dad?"

Dad stood in the darkness, muttering: "That's the lard, and the butter, and the wheat, and the rye..."

Then out of the pitch dark flashed Dad's thumb, which peeled off twenty banknotes for the drayman.

There will be other tempests. Raging tempests! And everyone may perish. But not Dad.

The cart turned into a huge platform which engulfed the medical student's sack and my travelling-bag. And we sat down, legs dangling, and rode off into the darkness.

HOUSE No. 4, ENTRANCE 6, 2ND FLOOR, FLAT 50, ROOM 7

To tell the truth I've no idea why I crossed the whole of Moscow to get to this huge building. The document I had carefully brought with me from the mountain kingdom was valid for all six-storey buildings, or rather, for none.

The cage of the dead lift in entrance six. Got my breath back here. A door with two notices. One says "Flat 50". The other an enigmatic "F. Arts". Must get my breath back again. My fate is about to be decided.

I pushed open the unlocked door. In the semi-dark hall was a huge box full of papers and a grand-piano top. A room flashed past, full of women and wreathed in smoke. There was a short burst of typing. Silence. Then a deep voice said: "Meyerhold."

"Where's ASS Lit.?" I asked, leaning on the wooden barrier.

The woman by the barrier shrugged her shoulders irritably. She didn't know. The other one didn't know either. A long dark corridor. I groped my way along by guesswork. Opened one door — a bathroom. The next door had a scrap of paper nailed to it. Askew, one corner turned up. AS. Thank the Lord. Yes, ASS Lit. My pulse started racing again. Voices inside: mumble-mumble-mumble...

I closed my eyes and imagined the inside. This is what I saw. In the first room — a carpet, an enormous writing desk and a bookcase. Awesome silence. At the desk a secretary — probably one of the names I know from magazines. Then other doors. The section head's office. Even more awesome silence. Bookcases. Who's that sitting in an armchair? ASS Lit.? In Moscow? Yes, Maxim Gorky. The *Lower Depths*. *Mother*. Who else? Mumble-mumble-mumble. They're having a talk. Or perhaps it's Bryusov and Bely? ⁽¹⁷⁾

I knock lightly on the door. The mumble-mumble stops to be followed by a hollow "Come in!" Then more mumble-mumble. I turn the knob and it comes off in my hand. I'm petrified. A fine start to my career! Breaking the door knob! I knock again. "Come in!"

"I can't!" I shout.

A voice comes through the keyhole:

"Turn the knob right, then left. You've locked us in..."

Right, left, the door gives slightly, and...

I'M TOP MAN AFTER GORKY

I was in the wrong place! This couldn't be ASS Lit! A summer-cottage wicker chair, an empty wooden desk, an open cupboard, a small table upside down in the corner. And two men. One was tall and very young in a pince-nez. His puttees stood out. They were white, and he was holding a battered briefcase and a sack. The other man, greying and elderly with bright, almost smiling eyes, wore a Caucasian fur cap and an army greatcoat. The coat was covered with holes and the pockets were hanging in tatters. He wore grey puttees and patent leather dancing shoes with little bows.

My lack-lustre gaze passed over the faces, then the walls, looking for another door. But there was none. The room with the broken wires had no windows. *Tout*. In a rather thick voice:

"Is this ASS Lit.?"

"Yes."

"Could I see the head, please?"

"That's me," the old man replied affectionately.

He picked up a large page of a Moscow newspaper from the desk, tore a piece

off, sprinkled some tobacco on it, rolled himself a cigarette and asked me:

"Got a match?"

I struck a match automatically, and then under the old man's affectionately enquiring gaze took the precious paper out of my pocket.

The old man bent over it, and I racked my brains wondering who he could be. Most of all he looked like Emile Zola without a beard.

The young man also read the paper over the old man's shoulder. They finished and looked at me with a kind of puzzled respect.

Old man:

"So you?..."

"I'd like a job in ASS Lit.," I replied.

"Splendid! Well, I never!" the young man exclaimed in delight.

He took the old man aside and started whispering. Mumble-mumble-mumble.

The old man spun round on his heels and grabbed a pen off the desk. The young man said quickly:

"Write an application."

I had an application in my breast pocket. I handed it over.

The old man flourished the pen. It made a scratching sound and jerked, tearing the paper. He dipped it in a small bottle. But the bottle was dry.

"Got a pencil?"

I handed him a pencil, and the head scrawled:

"Please appoint as Secretary of ASS Lit. Signed..."

I stared open-mouthed at the dashing squiggle.

The young man plucked my sleeve.

"Hurry upstairs, before he goes. Quick."

I shot upstairs. Barged through the door, tore across the room with the women and went into the office. The man sitting in the office took my paper and scribbled: "Appt. seer." Letter. Squiggle. He yawned and said: "Downstairs."

I raced downstairs again in a tizzy. Past the typewriter. Then instead of a bass, a silvery soprano said: "Meyerhold. October in the Theatre..."

The young man was storming round the old man and chortling.

"Did they appoint you? Fine! We'll see to it. We'll see to everything!"

Then he clapped me on the shoulder:

"Don't worry! You'll get everything."

I have always detested familiarity and always been a victim of it. But now I was so overwhelmed by what had happened, that all I could do was say weakly:

"But we need desks ... chairs ... and at least some ink!"

The young man shouted excitedly:

"You'll get them! Good lad! You'll get everything!"

He turned to the old man, winked at me and said:

"He means business, that lad! Fancy asking for desks straightforward. He'll put things right for us."

*

Appt. Seer. Heavens! ASS Lit. In Moscow. Maxim Gorky. *The Lower Depths*.
Sheherazade. *Mother*.

*

The young man untied the sack, spread a newspaper on the table and poured about five pounds of lentils onto it. "That's for you. A quarter of the food ration."

I PLUG IN ASS LIT

Historians of literature, take note:

At the end of 1921 three people were engaged in literature in the Republic: the old man (dramas; he turned out not to be Emile Zola, of course, but someone I didn't know), the young man (the old man's assistant, whom I didn't know either — poetry) and myself (who hadn't written a thing).

Historians, also note: ASS Lit. had no chairs, desks, ink, light bulbs, books, writers or readers. In short, nothing.

And me. Yes, I rustled up from nowhere an antique mahogany writing-desk. Inside I found an old, yellowing, gold-edged card with the words: "...ladies in semi-decollete evening dress. Officers in frock-coats with epaulettes. Civilians in uniform tail-coats, with decorations. Students in uniform. Moscow. 1899."

It smelt soft and sweet. A bottle of expensive French perfume had once stood in the drawer. After the desk a chair arrived. Then ink, paper, and finally a young lady, sad and pensive.

On my instructions she laid out everything that had been in the cupboard on the desk: some brochures about "saboteurs", 12 issues of a St. Petersburg newspaper and a pile of green and red invitations to a congress of provincial sections. It immediately began to look like an office. The old man and the young man were delighted. They clapped me on the shoulder affectionately and vanished.

The sad young lady and I sat there for hours. Me at the desk and she at the table. I read *The Three Musketeers* by the inimitable Dumas, which I had found on the floor in the bathroom. The young lady sat in silence, occasionally heaving a deep sigh.

"Why are you crying?" I asked.

In reply she started sobbing and wringing her hands. Then she said:

"I've found out that I married a bandit by mistake."

I don't know if anything could surprise me after these two years. But at this I just stared blankly at her...

"Don't cry. Things like that do happen."

And I asked her to tell me about it.

Wiping her eyes with a handkerchief, she told me she had married a student, enlarged a photograph of him and hung it in the drawing-room. Then a detective came, took one look at the photograph and said it was not Karasev at all, but Dolsky, alias Gluzman, alias Senka Moment.

"Mo-ment..." the poor girl said, shuddering and wiping her eyes.

"So he's gone, has he? Well, good riddance to him."

But this was the third day. And still nothing. Not a soul had come. Nothing at all. Just me and the young lady...

I suddenly realised today: ASS Lit. isn't plugged in. There's life overhead. People walking about. Next door too. Typewriters clattering away and people laughing. They get clean-shaven visitors too. Meyerhold's fantastically popular in this building, but he's not here in person.

We have nothing. No papers, nothing. I decided to plug ASS Lit. in.

A woman came upstairs with a pile of newspapers. The top one was marked in red pencil "For ASS Fine Arts".

"What about one for ASS Lit.?"

She looked at me in fright and did not answer. I went upstairs. To the young lady sitting under a notice that said "secretary". She listened to me, then looked nervously at her neighbour.

"That's right, ASS Lit..." said the first young lady. "There is a paper for them, Lidochka," said the second. "Then why didn't you deliver it?" I asked in an icy tone. They both looked worried. "We thought you weren't there."

*

ASS Lit. is plugged in. A second paper has arrived from the young ladies upstairs. A woman in a kerchief brought it. Asked me to sign for it in a book.

Wrote a memo to the Service Department: "Give me a car."

A man came two days later and shrugged his shoulders.

"Do you really need a car?"

"More than anyone else in this building, I should say."

I managed to find the old man. And the young one too. When the old man saw the car and I told him he had to sign the papers, he gave me a long look, ruminating.

"There's something about you. You should apply for an academician's food ration."

The bandit's wife and I started drafting an official claim for payment of salary. ASS Lit. was firmly plugged into the mainstream now.

N. B. My future biographer: all this was done by me.

THE FIRST SWALLOWS

At 11 a. m. a young poet, obviously frozen to death, came in and said quietly: "Storn."

"What can I do for you?"

"I'd like a job in ASS Lit."

I unrolled a sheet of paper headed "Staff". ASS Lit. was allowed eighteen members of staff. I was vaguely hoping to allocate these posts as follows:

Poetry instructors: Bryusov, Bely, etc.

Prose writers: Gorky, Veresayev, Shmelyov, Zaitsev, Serafimovich, etc.

But none of the afore-mentioned showed up.

So with a bold hand I scribbled on Storn's application: "Pise, appt." instr. pp. head." Letter. Squiggle.

"Go upstairs while he's still here."

Then the curly-headed, rosy-cheeked poet Skartsev arrived, full of joie de

vivre.

"Go upstairs while he's still here."

A gloomy fellow in glasses, about twenty-five, so thick-set he seemed to be made of bronze, arrived from Siberia.

"Go upstairs..."

But he replied:

"I'm not going anywhere."

He sat down in a corner on a rickety, broken chair, pulled out a scrap of paper and started writing some short lines. Obviously a very experienced fellow.

The door opened and in came a man wearing a nice warm coat and a sealskin hat. It was a poet. Sasha.

The old man wrote the magic words. Sasha looked round the room carefully, fingered the dangling piece of broken wire thoughtfully, and for some reason looked into the cupboard. He sighed.

Sitting down beside me, he asked confidentially:

"Will they pay cash?"

WE WORK UP STEAM

There was no room at the desks. We were all writing slogans, with a new fellow, very active and noisy, in gold glasses, who called himself the king of reporters. The king appeared the morning after we got an advance, at 8.45 a. m. with the words:

"Is it true they paid out cash here?"

And joined the staff on the spot.

The episode of the slogans was like this.

A memo arrived from upstairs.

"ASS Lit. urgently requested to produce a set of slogans by 12 noon."

Theoretically this is what was supposed to happen: the old man with my assistance would issue an order or summons to all places where there were supposed to be writers. We would then receive thousands of slogans from all over the country, by telegraph, letter and word of mouth. Then a commission would select the best and present them by 12 noon on a certain date. After that my secretarial staff (i. e., the bandit's sad wife) and I would draw up a claim for payment, receive the monies concerned and pay the most deserving for the best slogans.

But that was in theory.

In practice, however:

1) It was impossible to issue a summons, because there was no one to summon. All the writers within the field of vision were: the above-mentioned, plus the king.

2) Excluded by one: we could not possibly be flooded with slogans.

3) The slogans could not be submitted by 12 noon on such-and-such a date, because the memo arrived at 1.26 p. m. on the date in question.

4) We needn't have written a claim for payment, because there was no "slogan" allocation. But — the old man did have a small, precious amount for travel allowances.

Therefore: a) The slogans shall be written as a matter of urgency by all those present;

b) a commission to consider the slogans shall be set up consisting of all those present to ensure complete impartiality; and

c) the best slogans shall be selected and the sum of fifteen thousand roubles paid for each of them.

We sat down at 1.50 p. m. and the slogans were ready by 3 o'clock. Each of us managed to squeeze out five or six, with the exception of the king who wrote nineteen in verse and prose.

The commission was fair and strict.

I, the writer of slogans, had nothing in common with the other me who accepted and criticised them.

As a result the following were accepted:

three slogans from the old man,

three slogans from the young man,

three slogans from me,

and so on and so forth.

In short, forty-five thousand each.

Brrr. What a wind! And it's starting to drizzle. The meat pie in the Truba ⁽¹⁸⁾ is wet from the rain, but delicious enough to drive you crazy. A tube of saccharine and two pounds of white bread.

Caught up Storn. He was chewing something too.

AN UNEXPECTED NIGHTMARE

"It's all a dream, I swear. Can it be black magic?"

I was two hours late for work today.

I turned the knob, opened the door, walked in and saw the room was empty. Well and truly empty! Not only had the desks, the sad woman and the typewriter gone, but even the electric wires. Everything.

"So it was all a dream... I see ... I see..."

For some time everything round me has seemed like a mirage. A vaporous mirage. There, where yesterday... But why yesterday, for goodness sake? A hundred years ago ... an eternity ... perhaps it never existed at all... perhaps it doesn't now. Kanatchikov dacha! ⁽¹⁹⁾

So the kind old man ... the young man ... the sad Storn ... the typewriter ... and the slogans ... didn't exist at all?

But they did. I'm not mad. They did, dammit!

Then where on earth had they got to?

Walking unsteadily, trying to hide my expression under my eyelids (so they didn't grab me and take me away) I set off down the dark corridor. And realised that something funny really was happening to me. In the darkness over the door leading into a room which was lit, glowed letters of fire, as if on a cinema screen:

EVENT TOOK PLACE IN ST. PETERSBURG THE BARBER
IVAN YAKOVLEVICH...

I read no further, recoiling in horror. Stopping by the barrier, I hooded my eyes even more and asked in a hollow voice:

"Excuse me, did you happen to see where ASS Lit. has gone?"

An irritable, gloomy woman with a crimson ribbon in her black hair snapped:

"What ASS Lit... I don't know."

I closed my eyes. Another female voice said sympathetically:

"Actually it's not here at all. You've come to the wrong place. It's in Volkhonka."

I went cold all over, walked onto the landing and wiped the sweat off my forehead. Then I decided to go back on foot across the whole of Moscow to Razumikhin's and forget all about it. If I was quiet and said nothing, no one would ever know. I could live on the floor at Razumikhin's place. He wouldn't drive me, a poor madman, away.

*

But a last faint hope still lingered in my breast. And I set off. I started walking. This six-storey building was positively terrifying. It was riddled with passages, like an ant-hill, so you could walk right through it from one end to the other without going outside. I hurried along the dark twists and turns, occasionally wandering into niches behind wooden partitions. The light bulbs were reddish and uneconomical. Worried people scurried past me. There were lots of women sitting at desks. Typewriters clattered. Notices flashed past. Fin. Dept. Nat. Mins. I reached well-lit landings, only to plunge back into darkness again. At last I came to a landing and looked round dully. The further I went, the less chance there was of finding that bewitched ASS Lit. It was hopeless. I went down the stairs and into the street. When I looked round, it was entrance!...

A bitter gust of wind. Heavy cold rain began to pour. I pulled down my summer cap even further and put up my greatcoat collar. A few minutes later my boots were full of water, thanks to the cracks in the soles. This was a relief. Now I needn't kid myself that I would manage to get home dry. Instead of slowing down my journey by hopping from stone to stone, I just waded straight through the puddles.

ENTRANCE 2, GROUND FLOOR, FLAT 23, ROOM 40

In letters of fire:

QUITE RIDICULOUS THINGS ARE HAPPENING IN THE WORLD.
SOMETIMES THEY ARE TOTALLY IMPROBABLE: SUDDENLY THAT
SELFSAME NOSE WHICH HAD BEEN PARADING AROUND IN THE
RANK OF STATE COUNCILLOR AND CAUSED SUCH A COMMOTION IN
THE TOWN, FOUND ITSELF BACK IN ITS PLACE AS IF NOTHING HAD
HAPPENED... ⁽²⁰⁾

*

Morning is wiser than eventide. That's true alright. When I woke up the next morning from the cold and sat on the divan, ruffling my hair, my head seemed a bit clearer!

Logically, had it existed or not? Of course it had. I could remember my name and the date. It 'had just moved somewhere... So I would have to find it. But what had those women next door said? In Volkhonka... That was nonsense! You could pinch anything from under their very noses. I don't know why they keep them on at all, those women. Egyptian plague!

I got dressed, drank the water I had saved in a glass from yesterday, ate a piece of bread and one potato, and drew up a plan.

6 entrances times 6 floors = 36, 36 times 2 apartments — 72, 72 times 6 rooms = 432 rooms. Was it feasible? Yes, it was. Yesterday I had walked at random along two or three horizontals. Today I would search the whole building systematically vertically and horizontally. And find ASS Lit. Provided it hadn't vanished into a fourth dimension. If it had, that really was the end.

By the second entrance I came nose to nose with Storn!

Thank the Lord! A kindred spirit at last-It transpired that yesterday an hour before I arrived the head of admin, turned up with two workmen and moved ASS Lit. to entrance 2, ground floor, flat 23, room 40.

Our place was to be taken by the music section, ASS Mus.

"Why?"

"I don't know. But why didn't you come yesterday? The old man got very worried."

"For goodness' sake! How was I to know where you'd gone? You should have left a note on the door."

"We thought they'd tell you..."

I gnashed my teeth.

"Have you seen those women? Next door..."

"That's true," said Storn.

FULL SPEED AHEAD

Getting a room of my own gave me a new lease of life. They screwed a light bulb in ASS Lit. I found a ribbon for the typewriter. Then a second young lady appeared. "Pise. appt. clerk."

Manuscripts began to arrive from the provinces. Then came another splendid young lady. A journalist. Very amusing, a good sport. "Pise. appt. as sec. of lit. feuillets."

Finally, a young man turned up from the south. A journalist. And we wrote him our last "Pise." There were no more vacancies. ASS Lit. was full up. And a real hive of industry.

CASH! CASH!

Twelve tablets of saccharine and that's all...

"The sheet or the jacket?"

Not a word about cash.

Went upstairs today. The young ladies were very snappy with me. For some reason they can't stand ASS Lit.

"Can I check our pay-roll?"

"What for?"

"I want to make sure everyone's on it."

"Ask Madame Kritskaya."

Madame Kritskaya got up, shook her bun of grey hair and announced turning pale:

"It's got lost."

Pause.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Madame Kritskaya, tearfully:

"My head's going round. You can't imagine what's been going on here. Seven times I wrote out that pay-roll and they sent it back. Said there was something wrong with it. And you won't get your pay anyway. There's someone on your list who hasn't been officially authorised."

*

To hell with the lot of them! Nekrasov and the resurrected alcoholics. I hurried off. More corridors. Dark. Light. Light. Dark. Meyerhold. Personnel. Light bulbs on in the daytime. A grey army-coat. A woman in wet felt boots. Desks.

"Which of us hasn't been officially authorised?"

Answer:

"None of you have."

But the best of it was that the founder of ASS Lit., the old man himself, had not been authorised. What? And I haven't either? What's going on here?

"You probably didn't write an application?"

"I didn't what? I wrote four applications in your office. And handed them over to you personally. Together with the one I wrote before that makes 113 applications in all."

"Well, they must have got lost. Write another one."

This went on for three days. After that we were all reinstated. And new authorisations were written.

I am against the death penalty. But if Madame Kritskaya is ever taken to face the firing squad, I'll go and watch. The same applies to the young lady in the sealskin hat. And Lidochka, the clerical assistant.

Get rid of the lot of them!

Madame Kritskaya stood there with the authorisations in her hands, and I solemnly declare that she will not pass them on. I could not understand what this diabolical woman with the bun was doing here. Who would entrust her with work? This was Fate and no mistake!

A week passed. I went to the fifth floor, in entrance 4. They put a stamp on them there. I need another stamp, but for two days I've been trying vainly to catch

the Chairman of the Tariff-Valuation Committee.

Sold the sheet.

*

We won't get any cash for at least a fortnight.

*

There's a rumour that everyone in the building will get an advance of 500.

*

The rumour's true. They've spent four days writing out authorisations.

*

I took the authorisations to receive the advance. Had everything. All the stamps were in order. But I got so worked up rushing from the second floor to the fifth that I bent an iron bolt sticking out of the corridor wall.

Handed over the authorisations. They'll be sent for endorsement to another building at the other end of Moscow. Then returned. And then the cash...

Got paid today. Cash!

Ten minutes before it was time to go to the pay desk, the woman on the ground floor, who was supposed to put on the last stamp, said:

"It's not set out according to form. You'll have to write another one."

I don't remember exactly what happened then. Everything went hazy.

I seem to remember yelping something painfully. Like:

"What the hell's going on?"

The woman opened her mouth:

"How dare you..."

Then I calmed down. I calmed down. Explained that I'd been het up. Apologised. Took back what I'd said. She agreed to correct it in red ink. Scribbled: "Pay cash." Squiggle.

I rushed to the cash desk. Magic words: cash desk! Didn't believe it, even when the cashier took out the notes.

Then it suddenly hit me. Money!

From the drafting of the authorisation up to the moment of receipt from the cash desk passed twenty-two days and three hours.

There was nothing left at home. No jacket. No sheet. No books.

ON HOW TO EAT

Got ill. Through being careless. Had beetroot soup with meat today. Tiny golden discs (fat) floating on top. Three platefuls. Three pounds of white bread in one day. And some pickled cucumbers. When I was full up, made some tea. Drank four glassfuls with sugar. Felt sleepy. Lay down on the divan and dropped off.

Dreamed I was Lev Tolstoy at Yasnaya Polyana. Married to Sofia Andreyevna. Sitting upstairs in the study. Had to write. But didn't know what. People kept coming up and saying:

"Dinner is served."

But I was afraid to go down. I felt stupid, realised there was a big misunderstanding. It wasn't me who wrote *War and Peace*. Yet I was sitting there. Sofia Andreyevna herself came up the wooden staircase and said:

"Come along. It's a vegetarian dinner."

Suddenly I lost my temper.

"What? Vegetarianism? Get some meat at once! I want a steak. And a glass of vodka."

She burst into tears. Then a *dukhobor* with a bushy ginger beard rushed up and said to me reproachfully:

"Vodka? Tut-tut-tut! What are you thinking of, Lev Ivanovich?"

"Not Ivanovich! Nikolayevich! Get out of my house! Scram! Away with all those *dukhobors*!"

There was a great commotion.

I woke up a sick and broken man. It was dusk. An accordion was playing in the next room.

I went to the mirror. What a face. Ginger beard, white cheekbones, red eyelids. But that was nothing compared to the eyes. Glittering again. That was bad.

*

Advice: beware of that glitter. as soon as it appears, borrow some money (not returnable), from a bourgeois, buy some food and have a meal. Only don't eat too much to begin with. Just clear soup and a little white bread on the first day. Take it easy.

I didn't like my dream either. It was a horrid dream.

Drank tea again. Remembered last week. On Monday I ate some potatoes with vegetable oil and quarter of a pound of bread. Drank two glasses of tea with saccharine. On Tuesday I had nothing to eat and drank five glasses of tea. On Wednesday I borrowed two pounds of bread from a plumber. Drank tea, but ran out of saccharine. Had a splendid lunch on Thursday. Went round to see some friends at

2 p. m. The door was opened by a maid in a white apron. Strange sensation. As if it were ten years ago. At

3 p. m. heard the maid begin to set the table. We sat and talked (I had shaved that morning). They cursed the Bolsheviks and told me they were exhausted. I could see they were waiting for me to go. But I sat tight.

Eventually the lady of the house said:

"Would you care to stay for lunch perhaps?"

"Thank you. I should love to."

We had: soup with macaroni and white bread, meatballs and cucumbers for the main course, then rice pudding with jam and tea also with jam.

Must confess something horrid. As I was leaving, I imagined the place being searched. They would come and ransack everything. Find gold coins under the longjohns in the chest of drawers. Flour and ham in the larder. Take the host away...

It was foul to think like that, but I did.

He who sits hungry in an attic over a feuilleton, let him not follow the example of the fastidious Knut Hamsun. Let him visit those who live in seven rooms and lunch with them. On Friday had lunch at the canteen, soup and a potato cake, and today, Saturday, got paid and ate myself sick.

STORM. SNOW

There's *a* hint of menace in the air. I've already developed a sixth sense. Something is giving way beneath our ASS Lit.

The old man appeared today, pointed a finger at the ceiling beyond which the young ladies lurk, and said:

"There's a plot against me..."

Hearing this I hurriedly counted how many saccharine tablets I had left. Enough for five or six days.

The old man came in noisily, beaming all over.

"I've foiled their plot," he said. No sooner were the words out of his mouth, than a woman's head in a scarf popped round the door and snapped:

"You there. Sign this."

I signed it.

The paper said:

"As from such-and-such a date ASS Lit. is disbanded."

Like the captain on the sinking ship, I was the last to leave. Our business — Nekrasov, the Resurrected Alcoholic, Hunger miscellanies, ⁽²¹⁾ poetry, instructions to provincial ASS Lits, I ordered to be filed and handed in. Then I turned out the light with my own hands and left. And just as I did it began to snow. Then rain. Then something in between the two lashed my face from all sides.

Moscow's terrible in periods of staff reductions and weather like that. Yes sir, that was a reduction alright. People were being sacked in other parts of that awful building too.

But not Madame Kritskaya, Lidochka or the sealskin hat.

Commentaries to NOTES OFF THE CUFF:

1. Melnikov P. I. (the pseudonym of Andrei Pechersky, 1818-1883), a Russian writer and the author of *In the Forests* and *In the Hills*, novels about Old Believers.
2. "Peter in a green caftan..." A reference to the Russian tsar Peter the Great who founded the Russian navy and used to build ships with his own hands.
3. "Black, white, slender, Vasnetsovian..." Victor Vasnetsov (1848-1926), a Russian artist who painted legendary subjects and also decorated the Cathedral of St. Vladimir in Kiev.
4. "The novelist Yuri Slyozkin..." The writer Yu. L. Slyozkin (1885-1947), author of the novels *Table Mountain* (*The Girl from the Mountain*), *Abdication* and others, which portray the events of the pre-revolutionary period and the years just after the Revolution.
5. "*I face the future without fear...*" A quotation from Alexander Pushkin's poem "Stanzas", which prompted certain circles of Russian society to talk about the poet's abandonment of his ideals. These accusations, which were disproved by Pushkin's life and writings, were repeated by primitive critics in the early Soviet period.
6. "...his Gentleman-of-the-Bedchamberism..." In 1834 Pushkin was appointed a Gentleman-of-the-Bedchamber (the lowest court rank in Imperial Russia). The poet was insulted and deeply angered by this unexpected "favour" from the Tsar.
7. A quotation from Pushkin's poem "A Bacchanal Song".
8. "*Indifferent alike to praise or blame...*" A quotation from "A monument I've raised not built with hands..."
9. Yevreinov N. N. (1879-1953), a director and playwright.
10. "*Brother writers, your vocation...*" A line from Nekrasov's poem "In the Hospital" which continues as follows: "*holds the threat of doom...*"
11. "Yesterday Riurik Ivnev appeared..." The pseudonym of Mikhail Alexandrovich Kovalyov (1891-1981), a poet who belonged to the group of Imagists during the period in question.
12. "The third was Osip Mandelstam." Osip Emilievich Mandelstam (1891-1938), an Acmeist poet.
13. "The novelist Pilnyak..." The pseudonym of Boris Andreyevich Vogau (1894-1941), the author of the novels *The Naked Year*, *The Volga Flows into the Caspian Sea* and *Okay*, as well as several collections of short stories.
14. "Serafimovich arrived from up north." Alexander Serafimovich Serafimovich (Popov) (1863-1949), the author of the well-known novel *The Iron Flood* about the Civil War.
15. Nozdryov — a satirical character from Nikolai Gogol's novel *Dead Souls*.
16. A quotation from Pushkin's poem *The Poor Knight*.
17. "Or perhaps it's Bryusov and Bely?" Valery Yakovlevich Bryusov (1873-1924), poet, novelist and critic, the founder of Russian Symbolism. Andrei Bely (the pseudonym of Boris Nikolayevich Bugayev) (1880-1934), poet and novelist, a leading representative of Russian Symbolism.
18. "The meat pie in the Truba..." Trubnaya Square in Moscow, where there was a market.

19. "Kanatchikov dacha!" A clinic for the mentally ill.
20. A quotation from Gogol's story *The Nose*.
21. "...Nekrasov, the Resurrected Alcoholic, the Hunger miscellanies..." A reference to a book of verse by Nikolai Nekrasov (1821-1878), which was about to be published, a play called *The Resurrected Alcoholic* by an amateur playwright, and also various collections by Russian and Soviet writers, the proceeds from which had been donated to famine relief.

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